



SUCCESS STORY

People's Forums Foster Peace

Improving ethnic and religious harmony through dialogue

In the lush hills of Ambagamuwa in central Sri Lanka, independent Sinhalese farmers sometimes envy the steady income of Tamils living and working on the region's tea estates. The Tamils, in turn, wonder whether the Sinhalese enjoy a better quality of life outside of the poor housing and services available within the confines of the estates.

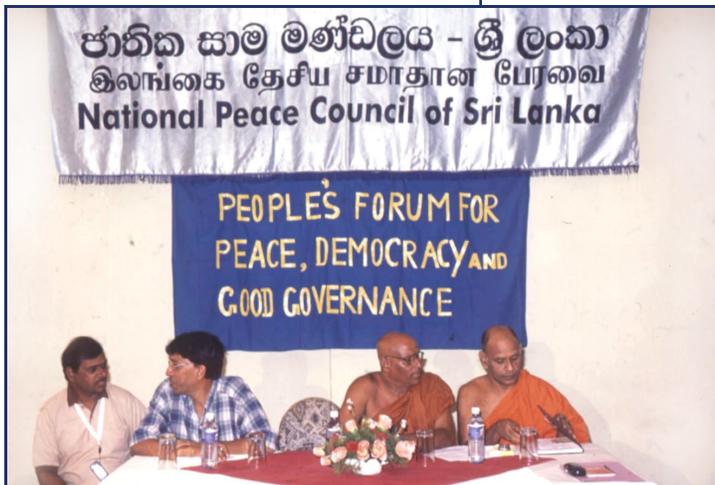


Photo: AED

A Muslim, left, appeals to people's forum representatives in Kinniya, Trincomalee district, whose population is equally divided between Sinhalese Buddhists, Hindu Tamils, and Muslim Moors.

To help break down such misconceptions, which can lead to tensions between ethnic groups, USAID sponsored a people's forum, where representatives of both ethnic groups identified an acute need for improved health services in both communities.

As part of USAID's project, more than 300 people took part in a traditional Sri Lankan day of community service, known as *shramadana*, which means "giving one's labor to the community." As Sinhalese and Tamils

worked side by side, they took steps towards breaking down prejudices between each other as they cleaned public spaces together and participated in counseling on health and sanitation.

In its mission statement, the people's forum in Trincomalee, a region on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka, identified key issues in the region: "Proper education, economic opportunity, and ethnic collaboration through inter-community functions will bring prosperity and peace to this region."

The gathering in Ambagamuwa was just one of 48 such people's forums across Sri Lanka. By 2007, the forums will have expanded to 72. Forums generally begin by addressing community development issues as a first step, and then move toward more difficult issues of peace building as they evolve.

The island's history of ethnic tension and ongoing civil conflict puts a premium on overcoming ethnic differences. The forums aim to encourage citizen participation and consensus-building through community projects and discussion groups that work towards developing action plans that identify common needs and outline ways to meet those needs. These ambitious agendas run the gamut from education and job skills training to recreation and social services. Through the forums, communities are beginning to craft a vision for their collective future, often including mission statements in their action plans.